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ABSTRACT

The issue of appropriate truancy intervention is addressed in this description of the efforts of Minneapolis, Minnesota to design a continuum of interventions that relies on the resources of both the school and juvenile court. Exigencies which precipitated a truancy pilot project are discussed: a shared belief that truancy is a signal for attention, and if left unattended, a precursor of more serious problems; a 1983-84 truancy study of court interventions and their impact on school attendance; and a compilation of school district truancy statistics including characteristics of students who were truant during the same period. The 1984-85 Truancy Pilot Project is then presented, with attention given to the target population, primary strategies, and pilot objectives. Four intervention levels are discussed: (1) school truancy team prevention and support intervention for all students; (2) identification and intervention for team-selected high-risk students; (3) truancy intervention strategies for truants; and (4) court surveillance for habitual truants. A list of seven implications for school social work practice are reviewed, with an emphasis on the need for continued work with chronically truant students and their families, and the desirability of viewing the juvenile court as a last resort intervention. (NRB)

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# A Last Resort: Truancy Referrals to Juvenile Court

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Introduction

There is a lively debate regarding appropriate truancy intervention. Much of the debate centers on whether status offenses such as truancy ought to be removed from the jurisdiction of the juvenile court. Some argue that the responsibility for truancy lies solely with the school. This article will describe one city's effort to grapple with the issue and design a continuum of interventions that relies on the resources of both the school and juvenile court. Discussion will include exigencies which precipitated the truancy pilot project: a shared belief that truancy is a "signal for attention", and if left unattended, a precursor of more serious problems; a 1983-84 truancy study of court interventions and their impact on school attendance; and a compilation of school district truancy statistics including characteristics of students' truant during the same period. Implications for school social work practice will be reviewed, with emphasis on need for continued work with chronically truant students and their families, and the desirability of viewing the juvenile court as a last resort intervention.

Background Information

Hennepin County Juvenile Court, Minneapolis, Minnesota, serves the school districts of Minneapolis and surrounding suburbs. Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) with a 1983-84 student population of 37,339, is the largest district within the county, and includes most of the county's minority population. The district has a long history of providing social services to achieve educational goals. Truant officers were first employed in the early 1900's, and with the merging of visiting teachers in 1917, became one of the first school social work departments in the nation. Currently social workers are assigned to all schools, and as members of multi-disciplinary teams, share attendance and truancy responsibilities.

Historically, the district has recognized the complexity of truant behavior. This view has been collaborated in the literature. Janis Johnson has stressed that truancy is very often a symptom of school, family, psychological, or social problems. She identified four major problem groupings: (1) disconnection from



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the school, (2) family difficulties, (3) emotional disturbances, and (4) peer pressure.[1] Renee Shai Levine developed an assessment tool citing multiple factors which have been documented in the literature to influence truancy. Factors are identified in four major sectors: the child, the home, the school, and the community.[2]

The district has sought assistance from the juvenile court in remediating truant behavior. In Minnesota, although removed from the definition of "delinquent child", students of compulsory school age (7-15) who are habitually truant may be referred to court. Since truancy is defined as a status offense, dispositional alternatives for adjudicated truants are limited by statute. The Hennepin County Juvenile Court, however, has allocated resources for truancy interventions based upon research, expertise, and experience showing that delinquency often begins with truancy.

In identifying red flags that indicate need for intervention with troubled youth, Richard Compton noted "a sudden drop in achievement coupled with truancy".[3] August Mauser reported that "one of the most frequently cited behavioral manifestations found in the literature related to juvenile delinquency has been truancy".[4] Miller and Windhauser delineated the following sequence for delinquency prone students: reading retardation through primary and intermediate grades; gradual truancy in secondary grades as students cannot legally leave school; delinquency as an outlet to find "success" unobtainable in school.[5] The U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (1974) also reported that although there is not necessarily a link between educational disability and delinquency, there is a common triad of reading problems, truancy, and delinquency.[6] Judge Allen Oleisky, presiding Hennepin County Juvenile Court Judge, stated his belief that working with young truant students may prevent them from reappearing in the courts later. He cited a Hennepin County survey done in the mid 1970's that indicated approximately 95% of juveniles who are treated as adults after committing serious crimes had their first contact with the courts as truants.[7]

Because of these shared beliefs, school and court cooperation in truancy has


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been ongoing for years. Subsequent events, however, created need for reevaluation. Minnesota law was changed in 1982 to simplify the process of truancy court referral from petition to citation and to define truancy as seven unexcused full day absences, or for secondary students, seven hours on seven days.

Concomitantly, in 1982 MPS embarked on a comprehensive, long-range planning process. The "Five Year Plan" focused on achieving equity and excellence in education for all students, and accountability based upon learner outcomes. Social promotion was abolished, and benchmark tests at various grade levels were initiated. All evaluation data demonstrated the close link between school achievement and attendance; new, more stringent attendance policies and truancy procedures were developed to coincide with educational objectives and changes in the law.

The results were not unexpected. The volume of truancy referrals to court increased dramatically: in the 1983-84 academic year to 1,332 referrals, 825 from Minneapolis schools. For Minneapolis, this was an 100% increase over the previous high academic year (1977-78); it was 500 more than the year prior to the change in the law.

The implications were soon apparent: the volume inhibited the court's ability to individualize in addressing the problems underlying truant behavior. In response, the court had to employ an intervention method which was both easily administered and cost effective. The processing of referrals, and accurate attendance record maintainance and monitoring, also interfered with the school's provision of direct services. Both institutions were devoting extensive resources to the process at a time of budgetary restraints. For the first time, the impact of the activities on school attendance was evaluated.

1983-84 Truancy Study

The 1983-84 Truancy Study, A Comparison of Court Intervention Strategies and their Impact on School Attendance was a project of the Planning and Evaluation Unit, Hennepin County Court Services. Schools collaborated by providing attendance data for the sample.



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The research study was designed to compare the effects of two court intervention strategies on the school attendance of adjudicated truants. Specifically, the effectiveness of the favored approach: a lecture, the disposition of four hours of work squad (unpaid work, in groups), and placement under court observation for 30 days with warning that further truancy results in additional work squad and that chronic truancy could result in out-of-home placement.

For purposes of this discussion, only a brief summary of findings directly pertinent to school and court truancy intervention planning, will be presented. It should be noted that although drawn from all of Hennepin County, 85% of the sample were MPS students.

Total Sample: 115 First-Time Truants

66 received stayed work squad/observation

49 received work squad (four hours of unpaid work)

35 Youth with Prior Truancies

150 Total

Results based on 137 out of 150 cases -- 91% response rate

* 79% of the first-time truants receiving the disposition of stayed work squad were absent without excuse at least seven times during the 60 day follow-up period. The average number of days truant for these recidivists was 19, or almost four weeks school.
* 77% of the first-time truants receiving the disposition of work squad were truant at least seven times during the follow-up period. The average number of days truant for this group was 22. No significant differences were found between the two disposition groups under study.
* Almost 85% of the youth with previous truancies were truant seven or more days during the follow-up, with the average number of days truant being 21.
* Approximately one-third of the youth under study were truant from school the very next day after appearing in court.
* Of the first-time truants with seven or more unexcused absences, only 52%



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were referred to court for a second citation during the follow-up. This indicates that nearly half of the juveniles who continue to truant after their adjudication hearings were not being returned to court despite their continued disregard for the compulsory attendance law.

* First-time truants who did not have any unexcused absences during the first week after court were less likely to be recidivist than those who displayed truant behavior during this time period.[8]

MPS 1983-84 Truancy Procedures and Statistics

MPS has developed formal, documented procedures that are carried out concurrently with informal school-based intervention strategies. Throughout the process, school social workers and other staff may telephone parents, make home visits, provide counseling, refer students for special education assessment, and seek assistance from other school and community resources.

Formal procedures include: (1) a principal's letter to parent(s) after three days of unexcused absences; (2) after seven days, a letter from a MPS attorney to parent(s) warning that the youth has broken the compulsory attendance law, that the youth and parent(s) may be held legally responsible for this behavior, and that private data will be released if a citation is written; (3) if truancy continues, after five calendar days, a citation for truancy written by the school's police liaison officer.

In 1983-84, 825 referrals were made to the court; 1,529 letters were sent to parents by the district's attorney. Consistently, this letter -- albeit controversial because it delays immediate referral -- appears to be an effective deterrent. Forty-six percent of truants who received the letter in 1983-84 were not referred on to court.

Fifty percent of the MPS students referred to court came from junior high schools, 35% from senior high schools, and 15% from elementary schools. Because of the recognition that parental responsibility is highest at this grade level, the court refers elementary-aged students to Hennepin County Community Services, Protective



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Services. Referred students were truant an average of 12.8 full days and 7.7 partial days at point of referral. Although high, the district has significantly reduced the number of days truant before referral in recent years. The referred student's average age was 13.4. In elementary schools, two-thirds of referred students were boys, but by junior and senior high school, boys and girls were equally truant. In 1983-84, 36% of MPS students were minority Americans. Minority representation among referred students in elementary and junior high schools was significantly disproportionate (63% and 49% respectively). The percentage of minority Americans referred in senior high schools was less disproportionate (33%). Although 6% of MPS students were Asian American, and generally recent immigrants to the country, only five were referred for truancy.

Referral forms completed by school personnel indicated that 79% of referred students lived in single parent families; 37% of the general school population lived in single parent families.

Using the county's sample drawn from Minneapolis schools (127 students), a survey of centralized special education records showed that 34% had received some level of special education services while enrolled in the district. Because resources did not allow a thorough review of individual records to discern non-district services, it is likely that this represents a minimal estimate.

When preparing referrals, school social workers were instructed to document school programs and services used to remediate truancy. School social work was listed as "program used" in 66% of all referrals, and generally, an average of two "programs" were listed for each referral. Community referral to a variety of agencies was the most frequent service provided (546 referrals). The data collected indicated that in almost all cases, the social worker, or other school staff member, had contacted parents, and that schools were seeking assistance from school programs and community resources before making referrals to court.

Implications for Planning

All data showed that the school district had increased its use of the court,



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although information collected generally substantiated claims that it was used as a last resort in those cases where other school and community interventions failed. Certainly both institutions were allocating significant resources to the process. School and court practitioners and officials were concerned, however, that the volume of cases, and lack of adequate resources, precluded individualization and direct services at all levels of intervention. Moreover, a classic double-bind existed: if schools used the court as a last resort, the number of days truant before referral increased; the court then truly saw the "habitual truant" for whom it had diminished impact because of limited resources. Conversely, if MPS immediately referred truant students, the court would have "seen them early" but have been overwhelmed by numbers, and the school, better able to solve the problem, would have relinquished the opportunity.

Data collected by both school and court collaborated the supposition that truancy should be viewed as a "signal for attention". Both the number of students who received special education services, or referrals to family, mental health, or chemical treatment agencies, and the characteristics of students truant in Minneapolis schools point to a high-risk population.

The court, in summary, saw students with habitual truant behavior, generally symptomatic of other complex problems. Its responses were constrained by statute and resources. Obviously, with nearly 80% recidivism, the juvenile court was not having the impact intended. The school district -- although decreasing truant behavior in some of its students -- had been unable to divert 825 young people from the juvenile justice system. This high-risk group needed more individualized attention and intervention that either system had to offer.

Finally, the dimension of the problem went beyond the purview of the school and the court. The problem also belonged to the family. But for this group of students, it is likely that families too were stressed. The repercussions of unattended truancy for society may be reflected in future welfare, unemployment, and correctional statistics. Thus truancy was, and remains, a community problem.

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1984-85 Truancy Pilot Project

Unwilling to abandon their joint commitment to collaboration in truancy interventions, school and court officials used the data collected to develop a model that more effectively and efficiently used resources.

Target Population

The school district concentrated its resources in junior high schools. The average truant was 13, and more referrals came from junior high schools. There was more potential for involving parents and intervening before truant behavior was habitual. Young adolescents were more amenable to helping adult relationships, role models, and behavior change.

Primary Strategies

Two pilot junior high schools were selected for implementation of all strategies. All six junior high schools, however, and two elementary schools, were assigned truancy intervention workers and truancy clerks, in addition to already assigned school social workers.

Two Hennepin County Court Services professional case aides were assigned to the pilot schools. With functions similar to probation officers, they will provide case management and direct services to pilot school students referred to court for truancy.

Pilot Objectives

The primary objectives of the pilot are to: (1) view truancy as a signal for attention and reflective of unresolved problems within the student, the home, the school, and the community; (2) individualize pre and post truancy interventions to meet the unique needs of students; (3) involve parents and community agencies in encouraging school attendance; (4) team at the building level in implementing truancy interventions; (5) provide consistent and prompt post-hearing follow-up to assure school return; (6) divert students from entering the juvenile justice system; (7) reduce the incidence of out-of-home placements.

Interventions

There are four intervention levels:

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Level I. Comprehensive building truancy team prevention and support interventions aimed at improving the attendance of all students. Truancy team includes: school social worker, truancy intervention worker, assistant principal, court case aide, and school counselor. Interventions may include: accurate attendance maintainance system; sharing of attendance expectations with student body and parents; court presentations to student body; contingency programs for good attendance; mobilization of community agency and local business community support.

Level II. Early identification and intervention for those students identified by team members as high-risk for truancy. Interventions may include: attendance monitoring; student counseling; personal contacts with parent(s); scheduling/classroom modifications; referral to school and community resources; MPS principal's letter to parent(s) after three days of unexcused absence.

Level III. Truancy intervention process initiated for students identified as truant. If no improvement in attendance following parent(s) receipt of the attorney's warning letter, for first-time truants, a school-based panel meeting is requested by the school and court. Panel participants include school truancy team, parent(s) and student. Purposes of the school-based panel meeting are to: review attendance; share consequences of continued truancy; assess needs; explore resources/options; make recommendations; develop a contract, and assign a case manager. Student's adherence to contract will be monitored following the panel meeting.

Level IV. Court surveillance for students who continue to truant and are referred to juvenile court. Case aides attend hearing, and following disposition will monitor and follow-up to assure

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next day school return, and/or re-referral if truancy continues. During observation period, case aide will work closely with truancy team members, parent(s), student, and agency personnel to encourage school attendance.

Implications for School Social Work Practice

1. Truant behavior is a "red flag" for needed intervention. While the image of the early truant officer may jade social workers' interest in working in this area, it is likely that this group of students would be referred to the school social worker under most circumstances. The MPS students identified as truant in 1983-84 were certainly at risk. That a significant number had been referred for special education services at some time in their school career, substantiates the contention that even when social work funding is based on services to handicapped students, truancy intervention is an appropriate function.
2. Skepticism of the approach to truancy intervention discussed is appropriate. Certainly school and court practitioners and officials in Minneapolis continually question the efficacy of court intervention given the impact on actual attendance. The focus on attendance can be viewed, however, as a screening function allowing social workers to identify students who need assistance. Because of the process, many students -- including those not included in the 825 referred group -- are referred for school and community services or provided other school support. Many more parents became aware of their children's school problems, and were involved at some level in addressing them. Without the process, many needs might go undetected.
3. School districts employ school social workers to support their educational mission. Because of current exigencies, school social workers are being called upon to demonstrate their contribution to achievement of educational goals. Nowhere are social work services more clearly tied to these goals than in attendance and truancy work.



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4. Social workers assigned to elementary and junior high schools should be constantly alert to developing truancy patterns. All MPS experience points to the necessity of early intervention. When the patterns have become well established, the combined resources of school and court rarely penetrate them.

5. Experience has also shown that a team approach to truancy intervention is advantageous. Truancy intervention workers -- essentially paraprofessional positions -- have significantly increased the school's ability to reach out to parents and monitor daily attendance. Much of truancy work is clerical and routine follow-up; its functions appropriate for differentiated staffing. Concomitantly, the professional component is vital: because of the complex problems of which truancy is symptomatic, the professional social worker's assessment, treatment, and referral skills are essential. It is at this point that students may be identified as needing special education services or referral to treatment or social agencies. When blended, the functions and skills of both combine for effective intervention.

6. If, as suggested, truancy is a community problem, school social workers are in an optimal position to intervene. With their base in the school, they have traditionally been the link to the home and community agencies. School social workers are trained and experienced in "outreach". It is the key ingredient in any successful truancy program.

7. Finally, school social workers must be advocates in a school district's truancy program. Certainly advocates for individual students at all intervention levels. As importantly, however, is advocacy for a continuum of interventions ranging from school and community to court. Some educators, and social workers as well, believe that truancy is the court's problem. It is the "law and order" approach: "get them to court". Bypassing school interventions not only abdicates school responsibility, but plays the "trump card" first. In Minnesota, since dispositional alternatives for adjudicated


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truants are limited by statute, and juvenile courts are overburdened, the court is not in the best position to intervene. Early, aggressive interventions by the school, using home and community assistance, should be the first choice. When that fails, as a last resort, court intervention may be warranted and needed.

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